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**THE EPIPHANY OF DEATH** *1907*

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**A SERMON**

PREACHED IN ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

By H. S. H.

*On Sunday, Jan. 20, 1901*

**Remembering before God**

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## THE EPIPHANY OF DEATH.

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“ Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.”

St. John ii. 8.

No wonder that St. John's imagination was peculiarly stirred by this marriage feast at Cana. For, somehow, out of its trivial and passing accidents word after word broke which had its place in the mystery of the universal Thought of God.

“ They have no wine.”

“ Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.”

“ Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine, and afterwards, when men have well drunk, that which is worse : but thou hast kept the good wine until now.”

As we listen, we start ; we touch the very secrets of God, and of the soul. What was it which at that special hour told from within upon the surface of things, so that each light phrase, and even the casual jest, were shot through by the transfiguring light of some deep indwelling truth ?

And so it is with the phrase of my text. It records a momentary command to the servants ; and yet it strangely haunts the memory as with a mystic emphasis, recurring again and again as the very



voice of the Master at critical hours when a word is wanted to read the significance of that which is felt to be at work.

“Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.”

That is just the word that comes to mind whenever some stage or process of life which has hitherto been self-sufficing, with its own adequate interests and interpretation, is suddenly revealed to be but a preparation for another and a fuller development.

It is the word that comes to us, for instance, when Youth, which has been to us such a delight for its own sake, and which has asked for no other purpose or meaning than it gets from its own vitality, faces the fact that its years of irresponsibility have ended, and that it has got to justify its free and happy growth by proving what part it can play in a world that needs its services. Its merry games, its keen intellectual skirmishes, its delicious intimacies, its daring experiments with muscle and brain, which had been an absorbing joy for their own sake hitherto, are now to be sifted by the new test—“What has been the outcome? What function can you, who have been young, fulfil in a work-a-day world, for which you must leave behind games and skirmishes and experiments, and show yourself of use, gifted with a capacity for help?” The man looking back on what he is now to surrender can see that its value must lie, not in the mere joy it brought in passing (though, for this, he gives God thanks, indeed!), but in the trained intellect, in the disciplined will, in the controlled nerves, with which, ere it passed, it left him endowed. Not in vain those



rash charges down the arena of debate, in which he challenged all comers to a fall, if, now, he has himself in hand, and knows what it is that he understands and what it is that he is ignorant of, and how to keep reason and logic under the mastery of a self that has taken its own true measure. Not in vain the splendid vigour of athletics, if they have given him the firm hand and the sure eye and nerve that can bear, in hours of peril, the strain of a great decision. The Eton man who, in the heat of the Balaclava charge, shouted to his men the old cry which, when a steersman, he had called to his boat as it faced the toughest force of the current below Boveney weir—"Hard all, across!"—recognised that, far back in his boyhood, he had won the training which stood him in good stead in the later day of sore and terrible need.

So every one of us turns now and again to review his youth, acknowledging that its justification must be found in that which it has equipped us for doing when youth itself is fled. The capacities have been shaping which we are to exercise. The powers are stored on which we can draw. Something we are : something we have. And the word that should ring in our ears, carrying to us the demand which the Eternal Father, Ruler of the Feast of Life, is now making upon us, is—"Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast."

Back the words come, again, as we watch a girl called, by a new summons, to step out of the fair and free maidenhood which has been so good, so sufficient a possession hitherto, for its own sake alone. So inexhaustible has seemed to be, as yet, its

treasure! No jealous limitations had made their presence felt. Simply to exist was delicious. But, now, it has all become subordinate to the higher purpose. It falls under the new test. What can it yield, of wealth, and patience, and hope, and courage for the new task now before it—for the life of the wife and the mother? God and man wait to see what is to be the outcome of all that has been.

“Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.”

Or, again: the young Priest, bowed under the consecrating hands, hears the same challenge in his ears as he sends his heart back into the pleasant years of his laymanship. How vivid they had been while they were upon him! How enthralling their clamorous interests! How keen the swift experiences! He asked no more, then, than to live. But, after all, those years had another obligation laid upon them. What fruit have they ripened? What faculties have they set stirring? They have to verify their worth on a new plane. The Priest must prove what the layman has been. Let us see what it all comes to. “Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.”

And, surely, these are the words that we may well find on our lips and in our souls as often as we stand at the grave-side of our dead. Their life has been, till now, its own sufficing interest. It lay ringed within its own familiar horizon. It had its own aims, activities, concerns. Its duties, its affections, its recreations, its achievements have filled the scene. Life was itself a fascination, and to live

well—to live fully, richly, finely, under the eye of God, for the service of man—was itself the paramount matter. It was its own justification, its own interpretation, its own satisfaction, its own end. Until, suddenly, at a stroke, Death brings it into a new perspective—weighs it by another measure. There is another world, within which lies the true interpretation of this. There is another life, for which all this is but a brief preparation. That which here has kindled and absorbed was, after all, but the school in which these dead of ours first tested their powers. They were but practising 'prentice hands. They were but learning how to hold the tools. Elsewhere—on a level as yet unknown—it remains to be seen how they will put to use and profit the gifts discovered here.

And now the time has come to try. The preparation is over. The real opportunity has arrived. God enters to see what gain He has secured, what is ready for His high service: "Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast."

Ah! Yes! you say; the words would come home, if they were spoken over an aged life, completed, full to the brim, which was well ready to pass from the scene of its ripe experiences, and bearing with it all over which here it had won the mastery.

But how can we dare say the words over him whom we mourn to-day? Why "*Draw out, now*"?

In what sense was his opportunity on earth fulfilled?

How was the preparation completed?

He had been for so little a time among us here, in

London ; and yet, in that brief interval, he had given such promise of the life that lay before him. The stir and movement of his presence had made itself felt at once, and felt everywhere. London, so slow to perceive what is happening in its midst, could not but be aware of this new arrival. Not only throughout all the circuit of ecclesiastical ministrations did his keen vitality have instantaneous effect, but he was to be heard of far outside the habitual range of Church activities ; he took by storm points of social vantage that are normally barred to Bishops ; while, still, wherever he passed, the ears of men tingled with some vibrant stroke of wit, with some jubilant epigram, with some memorable phrase. Subtle, rapid, many-sided, daring, there was no phase of human emotion, no department of human interest, in which he had not a living share. Men inevitably listened, and wondered, and followed. Here was a man to note : a man of brilliant achievement : he has his career in life before him ; he has but begun ; he will go far : a man of nerve and brain who can tread in high and perilous places where the very peril attracts and fascinates. What will he not attain ? Where will he lead ? He has so strange a combination of gifts —and gifts of any kind are nowadays almost extinct. So, on all, within and without the Church, the quiver of his personality told. And, still, it was to the years ahead that they looked. He had as yet but put himself in evidence. He had but secured attention. He had but shown that the Church had in him great resources in store for the dangerous years before her. He had got hold of his great position. He had proved that even this huge,



unwieldy, sluggish mass of a Diocese could, actually, feel the impact, from end to end, of a vivid personal inspiration. Who can forget how he lifted along the dull weight of a London Church Congress by the sheer force of his tense and radiant individuality? Or how he struck on the imaginative heart of the hour here, in this Cathedral, at a moment such as the Thanksgiving celebration for the Queen's long reign—or the departure of the City Imperial Volunteers for South Africa?

But all this had but suggested the significance of the man who was now to direct the fortunes of the Church in London. He, himself, in every motion of his body, in the swing of his quick stride, in his lithe activity, in his flashing swiftness of thought, in his bewildering and delightful charms, in his eager intellectual energies, in his quick and ready outflow of affection, spoke of life—of life in its fulness and in its freedom—of a life that had got so much to say and do in an earth to which it responded with such inexhaustible fecundity. So alive he was that it is even now almost intolerable to associate with him the idea of death. And how, then, can we submit to the word which has gone out, "Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast"?

Ah! that fatal—"now"! Every memory, every hope, every instinct, every desire, every affection rises in protest against it. Nay! not yet! we say. The day is but half spent. The use of life is not half proved. Not now! but hereafter!

Alas! we know not how much of our own folly, or how much of the complicated sin of the world,

may have shortened the counsels of God for him here. We had weighted him with a terrible burden of work and of anxiety and of controversy, which may well have done something to mar what was designed for him. The woe of the world works itself out in bodily infirmities which fall on this one or on that with cruel indifference to their merit or their value, and so defeat the sure harmonies of Divine Intention. We cannot say how much of this our bitter loss need not have been, if we and all had been true to the best.

But whatever its secular causes, anyhow, now, God makes it His good Will that he should have passed away. He bends all into the dominance of His own Determination. He forces evil to yield good. He makes every disaster that can happen to us His own, if we will but yield ourselves to it and offer it to Him as our own sacrifice, so stripping it of all its taint and turning it into a pure offering unto the Lord for good. So it is that He asks us to fling behind us all carping complaint or staggering amazement, and to be content to throw our souls out in the free act of surrender. Yea, Lord! it is good that it should be so. Let him pass. He himself never desired to live long. He himself desired in his last illness to die. We bow the head. We close with that which God has made to become His Will. Let it, then, be as it is! "Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast."

And more than that. Is it not this very vigour of life that was in him—a vigour so insistent and so invincible—which makes it easier, in a measure, to say "Draw out, now"? "Draw out, now," in the full tide of his power, all undimmed and undegraded,



before the shadow of defeat or decline has passed upon it—at the moment when his vitality is ripest and richest—therefore “Draw out, now!”

For, indeed, it is this very fulness of life that assures us of the further use to which it will still be put in the world beyond death. The keenness with which we live our earthly life here is the measure of our demand to live again hereafter. Not those who despise this life, and treat it as a vain shadow, are those who have firmest grip on the life beyond the grave. On the contrary, the Hindoo contempt for the life that now is carries with it Nirvana, the desire to escape out of any life to come—the desire to be rid of personal existence.

It is the Jew, with his passionate absorption in the interests of this earth to the exclusion of all else—it is the Jew, with his whole being aware of the joy of living here, in the light of the blessed sun, here in the throng of human activities, here in the intensity of human affections—it is the Jew, crying out, in protests that even yet thrill through our very blood, against leaving the sweet air of heaven, and the touch of friends, and the tenderness of home, and the gladness of living—it is he through whom we gain our one sure hold on the necessity of another life, personal, real, actual as this is.

The rueful cries never sounded more tragically than when we read at Matins last Thursday, round his coffin as it lay amid the twinkling lights, the one and only Psalm in which the Jew's dismay at the loss of life knows no gleam of relief: the Psalm of him who is “like unto them that are wounded and lie in the

grave: who are out of remembrance, and are cut away from thy hand."

"Dost thou show wonders among the dead: shall thy wondrous works be known in the dark: and thy righteousness in the land where all things are forgotten?"

That is the true Jew speaking, with his craving for the present life, which he feels so infinitely precious.

And the assurance of immortality springs out of the appreciation of the value of life as such. The higher our value of life as it stands, now, the more absolute becomes our belief in its enduring and deathless validity. Raise the power of your life here if you would know why you are bound to go on living for ever.

And it is our Bishop's wealth of vitality which prohibits our stopping short in the blind fact that he is what we call dead. It is simply inconceivable that his abounding force should abruptly close. We think of him as alive. We cannot think of him as anything else. And, remember, this is not in the least due to mere sentiment, or emotion, or the cravings of the heart. Rather, it is the sheer necessity of logic, of the cool, inevitable reason. For reason can only interpret the world on the assumption that it is rational. So, alone, can it give it scientific coherence. But if that plenitude of unexhausted gifts, which we so vividly recall as they were but yesterday, is abruptly lost, without arriving, without transmuting themselves, without reaching any conclusion, then human life is utterly irrational. Death is an ambushade. There is no

meaning, no coherence, no intelligible principle in human things. Reason is helplessly blocked. The world, as we see it, is insane. It shivers down into senseless ruin — purposeless, vacant, blind.

No ! it is the intensity with which he lived which is our earnest that he cannot but live. There has been no arrest. Nothing is lost. What he was, he is. Elsewhere, there will be other uses for those swift energies, other service for him to fulfil. “Draw out then, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.”

What shall we bear? What vintage? What notable fruit, drained out of life's discipline?

Well ! let us recall some notes in his character that lie deeper than the surface brilliancy which was so obvious to everyone who met him,

(1) His devotion to work—for instance—hard, persistent, serious work. Do we, who are more or less stupid, quite realise how strong is the will-power involved in hard work to a nature so alert, so quick, so versatile as his? How easy for him to trust to his ready wit, to his swift skilfulness, to see him through ! Nobody could have managed better than he, on a superficial knowledge, on a slight preparation, to put his opportunities to easy profit. An intelligence so acute and so fluent is always under severe temptation to shirk the irksome labour which is for others a sheer necessity. But he brought himself under the strictest yoke. He worked, with unremitting purpose, at the real under-grind by which alone solid results are to be obtained. It was sheer work to which is due, surely, his early death.

And his great work on the Popes is the unanswerable evidence of the thoroughness with which he went through the mill. What a surprise was that book, in style and type, even to those who knew him best! Thirty years ago, when I first knew him well, at Oxford, he was the brilliant chief of the young lecturers in the History School whom Bishop Stubbs had fostered and inspired. We looked for great things from Creighton of Merton, even then; but, whatever came, we fancied that it would be startling, dashing, probably paradoxical. Little did we foresee that he would produce a book from out of which all rhetorical artifice, all electrical paradox had been stripped—a book weighty, measured, balanced, stored with a solid mass of exact and accurate learning, which only two or three men in England were qualified to criticise. The book embodied enormous and patient work.

And (2) what excellent equity! What sanity of judgment! What solidity of treatment! These were the unexpected notes. Through it we saw and knew the man below the surface talk. It was another man than the man with whom we were easily and affectionately familiar. This was not, indeed, all our fault. Fascinating as he was in talk, he always, in those days, and, I fancy, to the last, treated conversation as a glorious game, an intellectual frolic, into the fictions and conventions of which he would fling himself without any afterthoughts as to consequences, playing the game with gusto, for the joy of liberating his faculties in the keen amusement of a gymnastic exercise. As a



game it was delightful. It allowed him to throw off the burden of responsibility. But it was only a game that he was playing, like a conjurer tossing magic balls. Back behind all the talk lay the man who could shed all trace of fantastic exaggeration, or rash retort, or quip, or flout, or riddle, or enigma. In every line of his historical studies there is the intense *veracity* of the true scholar, who has purged himself of all that can distract or distort. "The Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth." That is what he felt so acutely, so passionately, to be the good of all research in the Annals of the Record Office. "A true Historian"—that was his chosen epitaph. So it was that his Memoir of Queen Elizabeth can become the Class Book of a Roman Catholic seminary; and that he can, actually, travel through the turbid History of the Reformation Popes, and not let loose one question-begging epithet, nor pass one judgment that rouses resentment, or appeals to prejudice, or counts on an emotional effect. A magnificent feat for a man to whom paradox was so enthralling a temptation.

(3) So, again, who would have suspected that, at the back of the flashing cleverness which seemed to be at first in possession of the man, lay the deep-grounded root-belief in the elemental verities of human character, and the profound appreciation of the force and supremacy of moral goodness, which was so characteristic of him? No historian ever passed a more severe judgment on the moral lapses and laxities of great historical figures. He would tolerate no excuse here, and would allow for no

palliation. The same strong laws of moral conduct stand (he vehemently insisted) for the greatest as for the least, and would avenge themselves for all betrayal, however lofty or vast the cause which had provoked their suspension. It was this undeviating faith in moral righteousness which, I think, gave him his hold on the spiritual convictions which alone can undergird and sustain moral character. And to estimate the significance of this ground-faith of his, let me remark that he took his stand for God and made his great decision at the extreme hour of intellectual tension, when the panic roused by the new Criticism was at its height, and when the victorious efficacy of the scientific and critical methods appeared to have swept the field. It is difficult for us now to gauge the dismay of that bad hour. At the close of the 'sixties it seemed to us at Oxford almost incredible that a young don of any intellectual reputation for modernity should be on the Christian side. And Creighton, by temperament, lay open to the full force of the prevailing movement. No one could be more acutely sensitive to all that the critical spirit had to say. No one lent himself more freely to the æsthetic and other non-Christian influences of that distracted time. Yet, in spite of the swirling flood in which he found himself plunged, his inner steadiness of thought and will kept its balance. I recall, for I can never indeed forget, two special moments which told something of the secret of his spiritual choice. One was a farewell sermon to the University of Oxford, before his retirement to Embleton, in which, for half an hour or so, he elaborated the ideal of Art as the



interpretation of life and conduct, with a skill and a beauty which revealed how masterful had been its fascination for him; and then by a swift turn he rounded on his own picture: he displayed its moral insufficiency; he broke up the lovely idol, as it were, before our eyes and dashed it in pieces. It was a courageous act, in those far days, of self-revelation.

Another sermon, preached in St. Paul's as Bishop of Peterborough, seemed to spring out of close personal experience, as he spoke of that Psalmist's struggle, who was so staggered by the terrible facts of life that "his feet had almost gone, his treadings had well-nigh slipped," as he heard the evil tales of the adversaries of God go up in his ears. "Yea, and he had almost said even as they; but then" (here was the checking thought) "I should have condemned the generation of thy children." That was what Bishop Creighton showed to be the impossible thing for the men who took life seriously. Impossible to convict of folly all that had been best in human nature—all that had been the very ideal of goodness and purity and truth—all those who had shined as beacon-lights, and were an evidence of the highest that it was given man to attain. They cannot be all wrong who have lived most right. We are forbidden to adopt any proposition as true which would condemn the holiest and the best—"the generation of thy children." So the Psalmist stood and would not yield: though, even now he had no explanation to give. "Then thought I to understand this: but it was too hard for me." "Until I went into the sanctuary of God: then

understood I." "Into the sanctuary of God!" There, in the inner shrine, the mystery of God at last laid itself open: the burden was lifted. "Then understood I." So he read out the Psalmist's secret—and surely it was out of his own soul that he then spoke to us.

And it is in our confidence that within that Sanctuary he found his own answer to the torturing problems that beset us, that we can say, to-day, out of hearts that sorely miss him from our side, "Let him pass from out of trouble here into the peace of that sanctuary! Let him pass with all his serviceable gifts to the God who gave and takes away! We will not be afraid: we will not unavailingly protest." "Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast."

"Draw out, now, and bear." Nay, it is not we who say it, weak, miserable sinners that we are. The words fell of old from the lips of Him, the sinless Saviour, who alone out of His infinite Pardon and Compassion can purge our earthly gifts of their sin, and make them worthy to be carried before the Ruler of the Feast. Who of us would venture for one instant to ask for God's acceptance of any fragment of our life's issues for His higher service hereafter, if it were but our own pitiful self that we offered before those all-seeing Eyes?

How sharply would he whom we commemorate in our sorrow to-day rebuke us if we presumed to do, on his behalf, what we should shrink from even thinking of for ourselves!

Was anyone clearer-eyed than he to his own frailties and his own unworthiness? Did he not

know better than we what we so cheaply and so lightly criticise in him ?

Ah ! do we, who, with our humdrum virtues, jog along the safe highways of commonplace average life, at all estimate the difficulty for him to steer his rich and varied convoy of capacities safely through the cross-currents of perilous seas ?

He was set to a task which has wrecked many a man gifted far above his fellows. And yet he brought his ships to port ; and yet he survived the rocks and shoals ; and yet he held his course true to the very end ; and yet he spent himself, and all that he had, for the service of men, for the honour of his Church, for the glory of God.

Now his body lies in peace and silence within the covering shelter of this Cathedral which he loved.

And his soul is in the hands of Jesus, the Merciful Redeemer, the Lord and Lover of souls, who loves much those to whom He has forgiven much. Under the strong and pitiful handling of Jesus, all that withheld will be removed ; all that disturbed, be washed away ; all that was crooked will be made straight ; all that was yet undisciplined will be delicately curbed.

So the great Powers of the Eternal Pardon will do this blessed work. They will transmute ; they will refine ; they will purify ; they will renew.

Our prayers, with our memories and affections transfigured into prayers, will follow him in within the silent places of Purification. And here, on earth, we will remember all he would have us do. And, above all, the legacy of peace, which, during his last illness, he was, by the mercy of God, enabled to

secure for the Church in London, we will most surely pledge ourselves to retain.

So we will work here the better because of what he has been. So, to the Pity and Love of Jesus we will commit him—praying that, at last, the Lord Himself, when He has perfected the work that He had here begun in him, may say, with His own blessed assurance, “It is done.” “Draw out, now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.”













